

Maunaṃ Sammatilakṣaṇam? The Eligibility of Women for Vedic Study in Dvaita Vedānta

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Abstract

The traditional schools of Vedānta agree that women do not have the eligibility for Vedic study and ritual performance. However, commentators of Vedānta traditions must contend with references to women who are seers and learners in the Vedas. Madhva (1238–1317), the founder of Dvaita Vedānta, lays down a special category of superior (*uttama*) women who possess the eligibility for Vedic study. But does this category include human women, or is it limited to divine beings? This paper traces the history of shifts in the doctrine of eligibility as envisioned in the writings of major Mādhva thinkers in commentarial literature, arguing that commentators from the sixteenth century attempted to close down an earlier openness and ambiguity in the doctrine, thereby excluding human women from a special category, that would, in theory, allow them access to the Vedas.

Keywords

adhikāra – eligibility – Dvaita Vedānta – women – commentary

Introduction

A contemporary scholar and commentator of dualist (Dvaita) Vedānta, Bannaṅge Govindācārya, writes in his Sanskrit commentary to Madhva's *Mahābhārataatātāparyanirṇaya*, “Women should not make excessive effort in the study of the Vedas. However, superior women will be impelled by their nature to seek out the study of the Vedas. They will desire to understand the

Vedas. They will proceed to learn and teach it.”¹ This defence of women’s study mounted within the Mādhva tradition and worded as the explanation of Madhva’s own view on the matter follows a long commentarial history of discussion and negotiation on the subject of women’s eligibility (*adhikāra*) for Vedic study within the Dvaita Vedānta tradition.

This paper charts the issue of women’s eligibility to undertake Vedic study and ritual performance across five centuries of commentarial literature in dualist (Dvaita) Vedānta, a school of Vedānta that argues for a radical difference between the self and God. I analyze how an apparent openness on the part of Madhva towards women and Vedic learning is gradually closed down in the later commentarial tradition between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.

Given that the texts under consideration are technical commentaries on Vedānta scriptures, authored and studied by men from elite communities, it is clear at the outset that they do not present female experience in a historically accurate way.² While philological studies on gender have been criticised for this lack of historical accuracy, these texts are nevertheless useful in that they reveal shifting attitudes towards gender—attitudes motivated by social concerns regarding women as well as exegetical concerns regarding the text and the tradition.

I must begin with the disclaimer that my reading is embedded in contemporary concerns, just as the views of the commentators I examine in this paper are. I draw here from Sheldon Pollock, who speaks of three dimensions of philology: the historicist, traditionist, and presentist dimensions, which have their locus in the author, the tradition, and the present reader respectively. These three kinds of readings have their own notions of textual truth—truths that are often mutually incompatible.³ As Pollock points out, it is easy to forget that the task of the present philologist is not different from the task of the traditional commentator. The very concern with gender, which forms a small portion of this large corpus of religious and philosophical texts, is decidedly presentist in its choice. Therefore, I acknowledge that these are my own

1 *tena vedādyuccaśikṣaṇe na nirbandhaḥ strīṇāṃ samucita iti* | ... *yās tv adhikaprajñā uttama-striyas tāḥ svabhāvasahajatayādhijigāṃsante* | *adhīyate cādhyāpayanti ca* | *Mahābhārata tātparyanirṇaya*, henceforth *MBTN*, comm. on 29.38, p. 560. All translations are my own, unless otherwise specified.

2 The difficulties involved in recovering subaltern voices from Sanskrit *śāstra* texts are explored in detail in Ananya Vajpeyi, “Śūdradharmā and Legal Treatments of Caste,” in *Hinduism and Law: An Introduction*, ed. Donald R Davis Jr, Jayanth K Krishnan, and Timothy Lubin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 154–66.

3 Sheldon Pollock, “Philology in Three Dimensions,” *Postmedieval* 5 no. 4, no. Winter (2014): 398–413.

interpretations of the relevant texts even as I attempt to preserve the ambiguity of the source in my translations.

Ashley M. Walker and Michael A. Sells study female characters such as A'isha bint Abi Bakr, one of the wives of the prophet Muhammad, through a literary feminist approach that entails viewing canonical texts closely in the light of contemporary issues around gender. As a result of such critical reading, they argue that gender relations which appear to be essentialized become open to reconsideration and alternate readings.⁴ My objective, however, is not to argue that the primary sources of Dvaita Vedānta scripture can be re-interpreted now to allow women to pursue Vedic study or ritual, but simply to point to the gaps and silences in commentaries which have resulted in multiple interpretations that continue to be a matter of debate.

Stephanie Jamison models a useful approach in her study on the role of women in ritual in ancient India.⁵ Jamison uses a historicist reading of texts on ritual to analyse the unspoken assumptions that foreground these texts regarding gender and women's roles. Despite women occupying a very marginal role in ritual, Jamison is able to extricate the conceptual links between seemingly disparate ideas and create a nexus of associations made about women and gender roles within texts in ancient India. As Jamison argues, "[C]lose attention to *language* in all its uses can be a powerful tool in gender studies because it can give us access to levels of expression that are not the overt intent of the text".⁶

Jamison's approach is especially useful in its application to the eligibility of women in Vedānta scripture. The texts I examine here are mostly commentaries on the core scriptural text of all Vedānta schools—the *Brahmasūtra*. These commentaries do not base their arguments on practical concerns or existing social practices of women's involvement in rituals. Rather, like most Sanskrit scriptural commentaries, they argue for the infallibility and eternal nature of the source text and conceal their innovations by presenting them as the meaning of the source text. This commentarial creativity gives us an enormous wealth of textual material on a very small number of scriptural passages that are interpreted and re-interpreted over centuries; each commentary attempting to claim its interpretation as the authentic meaning of the source. This allows us to delineate the important historical points of doctrinal intervention through a close reading, thus tracing the shift in the doctrines of women's

4 Ashley Manjarrez Walker and Michael A Sells, "The Wiles of Women and Performative Intertextuality: A'isha, the Hadith of the Slander, and the Sura of Yusuf," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 30, no. 1 (1999): 77.

5 Stephanie W Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer's Wife: Women, Ritual, and Hospitality in Ancient India* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 12.

6 Jamison, 11.

eligibility. Simply separating the views of various commentators from one another dispels the notion of a singular traditionist view and reveals the internal disagreements and negotiations with previous writers on the issue of women's eligibility. Over the course of this paper, I demonstrate that the doctrine of eligibility of women is ambiguous in Madhva's thirteenth century writings. This ambiguity is maintained by Jayatīrtha, traditionally regarded as the most authoritative commentator on Madhva, writing in the fourteenth century, as well as Vyāsātīrtha, writing in the early sixteenth century. Later commentators, including Raghūttamatīrtha and Jagannāthātīrtha gradually clarify this ambiguity, reading additional restrictions into Madhva and Jayatīrtha that would prohibit all human women from Vedic study.

This discussion points to the tension between scholastic debate and the social conditions of its authorship. For to be silent or even ambiguous on women's *adhikāra*, as commentators from Jayatīrtha through Vyāsātīrtha were, is surely not the same as assenting to it. The issue, then, is how to account for moments when earlier silences (or ambiguities) are later voiced and resolved. In other words, I am interested in what shifts in the discussion on women's *adhikāra* can tell us about histories of commentary and exegesis, and possible reasons why, starting in the sixteenth century, commentators felt it necessary to voice an unambiguous Mādhva position. Finally, I look at a contemporary Mādhva exegete who extricates Madhva from the later commentarial tradition in order to claim, contrary to the last four centuries of agreement, that indeed the Mādhva tradition—from its earliest and most authoritative articulations in Madhva's work—supports women's eligibility for Vedic study.

The word '*strī*' as used by Madhva and his commentators encompasses not only human women, but also divine women and a third category of semi-divine women, who are the wives of sages. Indeed, most of the discussion in the paper deals with the question of female goddesses and the wives of sages and whether there is an overlap of these two categories onto the category of human women. Although the term 'human women' is pleonastic in English, I will use it to distinguish this category from divine women and female sages.

The Conception of Eligibility (*Adhikāra*)

The term *adhikāra* holds multiple connotations in Sanskrit intellectual disciplines.⁷ I translate the word as eligibility, but it must be noted that most of the

7 For a discussion on the varying connotations of the term *adhikāra* in Jaimini, see Francis Xavier Clooney, *Thinking Ritually: Rediscovering the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā of Jaimini* (Institution f. Indologie d. Univ. Wien, Sammlung De Nobili, 1990), 182–3.

relevant traditional discussions do not base this eligibility or lack thereof on the intrinsic intellectual or physical capacity to perform rituals or understanding the meaning of the Vedas. Instead, they focus on whether certain groups are permitted to undertake such activity based on prescriptions or prohibitions in sacred texts.

Discussions on the eligibility of various categories of people to perform Vedic sacrifices are found already in Jaimini's *Mīmāṃsāsūtra*, the root text of the Mīmāṃsā school.⁸ Here, we find an extensive dialogue on whether the usage of the masculine gender in a specific word (*svargakāmaḥ*) in a Vedic injunction enjoining the performance of sacrifices implies that only men are eligible, and women are not. The text holds that women are eligible and answers other objections, such as the idea that women are the property of their husbands, and that women do not possess property or other financial resources necessary to conduct sacrifices, finally concluding that women do have the eligibility to perform sacrifices, but they can only do so jointly with their husbands.

In Vedānta, a significant part of the discussion on eligibility shifts from a focus on performing sacrifices to undertaking Vedic study, generally regarded as key to liberation, which is the ultimate goal of Vedānta. Śaṅkara is very clear about the ineligibility of women for Vedic study and ritual, especially in his commentary on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*.⁹ Rāmānuja does not appear to make a clear statement prohibiting women from studying the Vedas, but he does not posit a special category of exceptional women who may be permitted access to the Vedas. Madhva's doctrine of superior women is unique to Dvaita Vedānta and does not have a historical precedent in either of these predecessors.

Women's Eligibility in Madhva's Words

Madhva's exposition on eligibility may be seen most clearly in his *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* (BSB) and *Mahābhāratatātparyanirṇaya* (MBTN). Within Madhva's doctrine, all intrinsically good beings are eligible for liberation.¹⁰ What is more, all those who are eligible must obtain liberation through knowledge and devotion. This knowledge may come from various sources, depending on the *varṇa*, gender, and other factors concerning the person involved. While *brāhmaṇas* obtain such liberating knowledge from the Vedas, other

8 *Mīmāṃsāsūtra with Śabara's commentary* VI.1.6–21, p. 607–615.

9 *duhituḥ pāṇḍityaṃ grhatantraviṣayam eva vede 'nadhikārāt* | *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya*, p. 806.

10 'Good', in Madhva's doctrine, is primarily equated with devotion towards Viṣṇu.

categories of people may obtain essential knowledge through other scriptural sources such as the *Mahābhārata* and purāṇas which illustrate the meaning of the Vedas, or even through the chanting of God's names. Therefore, liberation is not at stake in discussions on eligibility for Vedic study, since it is possible to attain liberation without such study. However, the determination of which categories of people are eligible to obtain knowledge from Vedic sources in order to obtain liberation remains a matter of discussion and commentary dating from the time of Madhva's statements on the issue in the thirteenth century. The history of this debate gives us a glimpse into the ongoing negotiations and contestations on the issue of gender, as well as the historical turning points in doctrine-formation within the tradition.

While excluding *śūdras* from the category of eligible persons for Vedic knowledge, Madhva references the idea that some women are not subject to the same exclusion.¹¹ In the *Jiṇṇāsādhikaraṇa* (1.1.1) of the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* (*BSB*), Madhva cites from untraceable texts to explain the categories of people eligible for Vedic study.¹² In Madhva's discussion, eligibility is not for the performance of sacrifices, but for liberation, given that all beings are not eligible for liberation. Within the set of beings eligible for liberation, there is a ranking of different sets of people, who are eligible to obtain the knowledge required for liberation through various scriptural texts—the Vedas, the Purāṇas, the tantras, etc. Madhva explains this—

It is said in the *Bhāgavatatantra*: People who are eligible [for liberation] may be divided into three kinds: inferior, intermediate, and superior. There, the inferior category consists of the set of the greatest humans. [Even the greatest of humans are inferior in comparison with the other two kinds of eligible people.] The intermediate ones are the *ṛṣis* and the *gandharvas*, while the superior ones are the gods. This categorization is based on birth (*jātikṛtaḥ*), while there is another categorization based on virtues (*guṇapūrvakāḥ*). The man who is devoted to the highest, [i.e., to] Viṣṇu, and engaged in study (*adhyayana*) is inferior. [If such a person additionally has] the attributes of equanimity, etc., he is termed intermediate. The one who, having understood that [the whole world, including] everything from Brahmā to a blade of grass, is temporary and of no

11 *uttamānām tu strīnām na śūdravat* | *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* of Madhva (*a*), henceforth abbreviated as *BSB(a)*. See vol. 2, 1.3.36, commentary on p. 286.

12 See Roque Mesquita, *Madhva's Quotes from the Purāṇas and the Mahābhārata* (Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 2008), 534, 536.

essence, acquires detachment and takes shelter in Viṣṇu's feet alone, who renounces [the fruits of] all actions, is regarded as the superior one ...¹³

As [it is said] in the *Vyomasamhitā*, even those devotees who are of the lowest birth (*antyaja*) are eligible for the knowledge of the name [of God]. Women, *sūdras*, and fallen *brāhmaṇas* are eligible for the knowledge of the tantras, but only for certain sections, only when the text is being taught to others, and not [directly from] the sacred text (*granthapuraḥsare*). Members of the first three *varṇas* who are correctly devoted towards Viṣṇu are eligible for Vedic instruction. They also say that superior women have the eligibility for Vedic [knowledge], such as Urvaśī, Yamī, Śacī, etc., and similarly the others.¹⁴

Madhva lays down two alternate taxonomies in the above passage—one based on birth, and the other on virtues. Madhva does not specifically state that this classification pertains only to males. It is common enough in Vedānta, and in Sanskrit *śāstric* traditions more generally, to use words with masculine endings to refer to all people rather than just men. We saw this argument in Mīmāṃsā regarding the masculine ending of '*svargakāmaḥ*', but it could apply anywhere. It could be extrapolated on this basis that the categorization of women too can be based on either birth or virtues. If superior women are categorized on the basis of virtues, this could potentially allow human women access to Vedic study.

However, Madhva clarifies in the second passage quoted above that not all women have access to Vedic scriptures, and lays restrictions even on their learning of non-Vedic scriptures, such as the tantras, probably referring to the Pañcarātra texts. This restriction on Vedic access does not apply to superior women, we saw in Madhva's passage. The names of Urvaśī, Yamī, and Śacī as given as instances of superior women. All these three women are in some sense divine, with Urvaśī being an *apsaras*, and Yamī and Śacī being goddesses.

13 *adhikāraś cōkto bhāgavatatanetre: mandamadhyottamatvena trividhā hy adhikāriṇaḥ* | *tatra mandā manuṣyesu ya uttamagaṇā matāḥ* || *madhyamā ṛṣigandharvā devās tatrottamā matāḥ* | *iti jātikṛto bhedaḥ tatrāṇyo guṇapūrvakaḥ* || *bhaktimān parama viṣṇau yas tv adhyayanavān naraḥ* | *adhamāḥ śamādisaṃyukto madhyamas samudāhṛtaḥ* || *ābrahmastambaparyantam asāraṇ cāpy anityakam* | *vijñāya jātavairāgyo viṣṇupādaikasamśrayaḥ* || *sa uttamo 'dhikāri syāt sannyastākhilakarmavān* | *iti BSB(a), vol. 1, 1.1.1, p. 112.*

14 *vyomasamhitāyām ca: antyajā api ye bhaktā nāmajñānādhikāriṇaḥ* | *strīśūdrabrahmabandhūnām tantrañjāne 'dhikāritā* || *ekadeśe parokte tu na tu granthapuraḥsare* | *traivārṇikānām vedokte samyagbhaktimatām harau* || *āhur apy uttamastrīṇām adhikāraṇ tu vaidike* | *yathorvaśī yamī caiva śacyādyaś tu tathāparāḥ* || *BSB(a), vol. 1, 1.1.1, p. 113.*

Moreover, all these three figures are seers of hymns in the *R̥gveda*, thereby necessitating an explanation for their presence within the Vedas if women are not permitted access to the Vedas. Madhva's passage does not limit the category to these women, however. Instead, Madhva uses the words 'etc.' (*śacyādyāḥ*), as well as 'and similarly the others' (*tathāparāḥ*).¹⁵ If there were no other mention of the subject, the definition of superior women would have to be extrapolated from the two previous definitions, but there are more references to superior women in Madhva's other writings.

Madhva discusses the issue in some detail in his *Mahābhārataatātparyanirṇaya* (*MBTN*). This would seem odd, because eligibility is a subject that is generally discussed in technical commentaries on the *Brahmasūtra*, but Madhva claims that *śruti* texts and *itihāsapurāṇa* literature are both authoritative scripture and do not contradict each other.¹⁶ To Madhva, both these canons are sacred lore and authoritative sources of knowledge. Madhva quotes from the purāṇas to assert that the *Mahābhārata*, along with the Vedas, is an authority in and of itself; one that needs no support from other scripture to be a valid means of knowledge (*svataḥ pramāṇa*).¹⁷

As a result, Madhva uses the *Mahābhārata* extensively in his arguments in technical texts. Commentators of the Dvaita tradition follow this pattern, and use characters from the epic as instances in their discussions on various topics, including discussions on women. While this is seen to some extent in Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta texts too, such as in Śaṅkara's explication of the *prima facie* view on the eligibility of *śūdras* that is later overturned, where he offers the example of Vidura as a *śūdra* with Vedic knowledge,¹⁸ the repeated use of the *Mahābhārata* is more extensive in the Dvaita case.

Towards the conclusion of the *MBTN*, Madhva lists out texts that each category of person eligible for liberation must know or understand in order to be liberated. In this passage, Madhva says—

15 It is interesting to note variant readings in different editions of Madhva and Jayatīrtha's commentary on Madhva's passage. Some readings have 'and similarly others' (*tathāparāḥ*), while others have 'and similarly other great ones' (*tathā parāḥ*). Since manuscripts do not have spaces between words, it is difficult to conclude which the correct reading is, but it does not make a difference to the fact that the category is open-ended. Jagannāthatīrtha adds an alternate reading of 'and similarly those inferior [to goddesses]' (*tathāvarāḥ*).

16 For details, see Valerie Stoker, "Conceiving the Canon in Dvaita Vedānta: Madhva's Doctrine of "All Sacred Lore,"" *Numen* 51, no. 1 (2004): 47–77.

17 For a discussion on the issue, see the first chapter in Anusha Sudindra Rao, "Of Deities and Demons: Madhva's Doctrine of Hierarchy in the *Mahābhārataatātparyanirṇaya*," MA Thesis, University of Calgary, 2019.

18 *viduraprabhṛtayaś ca śūdrayoniprabhavā api viśiṣṭavijñānasampannāḥ smaryante | tasmād adhikriyate śūdro vidyāsv iti | Brahmasūtrabhāṣya of Śaṅkara*, 1.3.34, p. 209.

All [the scriptures] other than the Vedas may be known by all women of the first three *varṇas*. All the Vedas too, may be known by superior women, such as Kṛṣṇā [Draupadī], etc. Indeed, goddesses and wives of sages, even when (*apī*) born in human and other families (*narādikulajāḥ*), must be known as superior ...¹⁹

This comes closest to a definition of superior women. Madhva likely refers to divine women who may have incarnated on the earth when he refers to superior women, although this statement later becomes the source of some ambiguity, as we will see in Jayatīrtha's commentary. The mention of birth in human and other families could likely mean that characters in the epic who were born as humans, but whom Madhva regards as divine incarnations, are eligible for Vedic study. The remarkable instance offered here is that of Draupadī, the female protagonist of the *Mahābhārata* epic.

Draupadī plays a very important role in Madhva's *MBTN*. In his works, Madhva presents an elaborate hierarchical system of all beings based on their intrinsic nature. Viṣṇu, (who is not different from his incarnation Kṛṣṇa) is placed at the very top, followed by Śrī, followed by Brahmā and Vāyu and so on, up to the last soul, Kali, who is irredeemably evil.

At the very outset, Madhva declares Draupadī to be Sarasvatī, the deity of learning.²⁰ Madhva considers Draupadī the personification of the Vedas themselves, so it would be deeply ironic if she were forbidden from reading them.²¹ This would confirm my reading of Madhva that goddesses who take birth in human families are to be regarded as superior, rather than human women. In the *Mahābhārata*, Draupadī is not conceived in the manner of other human beings. As a result of her father king Drupada's request, the priests Yāja and Upayāja offer a sacred oblation into the fire, and Draupadī and her brother Dhṛṣṭadyumna emerge directly from the fire. This appears to indicate that they are both of divine origin, but Madhva amends this narrative to include a detail about the nature of the two siblings. "Because of eating human food, and because of living in the company of humans, and because of being the children of humans, they both acquired the nature of humans. But they were not

19 *jñeyam sarvatrivarṇasthastribhir vedān vinākhilam | vedā apy uttamastribhiḥ kṛṣṇādyābhir ivākhilāḥ || devyo munistriyaś caiva narādikulajā api | uttamā iti vijñeyās ... | MBTN*, vol. 2, See 29.35–38, pp. 559–560.

20 *sarvavidyā draupadī tu yasmāt saiva sarasvatī || MBTN*, vol. 1, 2.143, p. 93.

21 *prāṇo hi bharato nāma sarvasya bharaṇāc chrutaḥ | tadbhāryā bhārātī nāma vedarūpā sarasvatī || MBTN* vol. 1, 18.103, p. 638.

entirely human, because they were not born from humans".²² This seems to indicate that while Draupadi is certainly superior, she is *not* born as a human, but acquires a human nature by being in the company of humans. If she is not born in a human family, then the obvious reading of Madhva's statement as restricted to goddesses and other divine beings becomes suspect, but the statement remains ambiguous, depending on how literally we are to take Madhva's statement about birth in human families.

The other important question here is the status of women who are the wives of sages (*munistriyaḥ*).²³ This question illustrates the slippage possible among the three seemingly exclusive categories. Are the wives of sages human, or do they count as divine? They clearly have special powers in the epics, but there seems to be no defining characteristic of the sages that makes them intrinsically different from human beings. Madhva's statement about eligibility categorises sages as intermediate and humans as inferior, implying that sages are super-human. However, while narrating the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Madhva explicitly mentions that Ahalyā, the wife of the sage Gautama, who had been turned into stone, regained her human state (*mānuṣatā*) after the touch of Rāma's feet, seeming to imply that the wives of sages are human as well.²⁴ If they are human, there is no need to state that they continue to have eligibility if they are born as humans. This implies, in turn, that human women form a third category who are eligible for Vedic study. So far, it is clear that Madhva does not explicitly preclude human women from accessing Vedic texts.

The other passage where we find a clear statement on superior women is in the *Apaśūdrādhikaraṇa* [1.3.33–38] in the *BSB*. This portion of the *Brahmasūtra* is generally cited in all three major schools of Vedānta to restrict *śūdras* from accessing the Vedas. The special exemption of some women from this restriction is explained in Madhva's *BSB* and commentaries on it. Commenting on 1.3.36, Madhva says:

22 *mānuṣānnopabhogena saṃsargān mānuṣeṣu ca | manuṣyaputratāyās ca bhāvo mānuṣa etayoḥ | abhūn nātitarām āsīt tadayonivahetutaḥ* || *MBTN*, vol. 1, 18.154–5, p. 650.

23 It is possible to understand the term '*munistriyaḥ*' as 'females who are sages', i.e., female sages, rather than as the wives of sages. Female sages and wives of sages would refer to the same set of people, except a few female sages who were regarded as celibate within some Vedic texts. The commentators mostly do not address the question of whether there are some female sages who are unmarried in the context of eligibility, so I have used the term 'wives of sages' in my translations. In either case, it does not alter my main argument that there is a theoretical possibility for human women's eligibility within early Mādhva writings.

24 *atho ahalyām patinābhisaptām pradharṣaṇād indrakṛtāc chilikṛtām | svadarśanān mānuṣatām upetām suyojayāmāsa sa gautamena* || *MBTN*, vol. 1, 4.10, p. 153.

[*Śūdras* do not have eligibility to study the Vedas] because initiatory rituals are [necessary] for the purpose of learning the Vedas as shown in statements such as “One must initiate an eight-year old *brāhmaṇa* and instruct him,” and because the absence of such initiatory rituals for *śūdras* is expressed in the *Paiṅgiśruti* in the statement: “There is no sacred fire, no sacrifice, no ritual action, and no initiatory rite for the *śūdra*.” But unlike the *śūdra*, this is not the case for superior women, because their eligibility is expressed in passages such as ‘Blow away my husband’s other wife ...’ [*Ṛgveda* 10.145.2]. The absence of eligibility where there is the absence of the initiatory rite is a general rule. Besides, there is an initiatory rite for them [women or superior women], from the *smṛti* that “The giving away of women [in marriage] is like the *upanayana*”.²⁵

The *Ṛgvedic* passage quoted by Madhva has Indrāṇī (identified as Śacī) as its seer. Here again, Madhva’s words are ambiguous about which women are superior, but he gives two reasons for their eligibility: a) The absence of eligibility in cases where there is no initiatory rite is a general rule that may not apply to every case, and b) The wedding ritual operates as an initiatory rite for women. Both these conditions may apply in the case of all women, not just divine women.

All these passages show good reason for the conclusion that Madhva’s statements are ambiguous on the eligibility of women, and Madhva, either intentionally or unintentionally, leaves open the possibility of women having access to Vedic study.

Jayatīrtha’s Reading

Commentators of the Dvaita tradition who follow Madhva are left to elucidate the subject of eligibility in their commentaries. In the characteristic style of traditional Vedānta commentaries, they all accept Madhva’s statements while interpreting his words on superior women in varied ways to understand whether human women are included. The debate surrounding this doctrine is not unlike the debate surrounding the category of *śiṣṭācāra* or ‘the practice

25 *aṣṭavarṣaṃ brāhmaṇaṃ upanayīta tam adhyāpayitety adhyayanārthaṃ saṃskāraparāmarśāt nāgnir na yajño na kriyā na saṃskāro na vratāni śūdrasyeti paiṅgiśrutau saṃskārābhāvābhilāpāc ca | uttamastrīṇāṃ tu na śūdravat | sapatnīm me parādhametyādiṣv adhikāraadarśanāt | saṃskārābhāvenābhāvas tu sāmānyena | asti ca tāsāṃ saṃskāraḥ strīṇāṃ pradānakarmaiva yathopanayanaṃ tatheti smṛteḥ ||* BSB(a), vol. 2, 1.3.36, p. 286.

of the learned' as a source of *dharma* in the *dharmaśāstras*, as elaborated by Sheldon Pollock.²⁶ None of the commentators deny that 'the practice of the learned' is a source of *dharma*, but they interpret the category of 'the learned' narrowly (as referring only to Manu and other sages) or broadly (as referring to anyone who has carefully studied scripture) in order to allow or disallow practice as a source of *dharma*.

Jayatīrtha (1345–1388) is the best known of all the commentators on Madhva. He is regarded as the systematizer of Madhva's doctrines, defender of Madhva's readings, and clarifier of Madhva's positions on several matters. In the words of BNK Sharma, Jayatīrtha was very important to Dvaita thought because "he gave final shape and form to its concepts and categories, standardized their definitions, formulated new ones where none had been given by Madhva ...".²⁷ We will go on to see that Jayatīrtha's writings open up the possibility to extend eligibility to human women.

While commenting on Madhva's *BSB*, Jayatīrtha explains Madhva's statement—"They also say that superior women have eligibility for Vedic [knowledge], such as Urvaśī, Yamī, Śacī, etc., and the rest." In this section, Madhva has given instances of goddesses and left the category open-ended. Jayatīrtha comments as follows:

[Interlocutor:] We see in Vedic passages like "Blow away my husband's other wife", that women are eligible. So how can you say they are ineligible?

[Jayatīrtha:] In order to counter this objection, Madhva gives the exception to the rule already stated, [i.e., that women are not allowed direct study.] Madhva says: "It is said that superior women have the eligibility [to study] the Vedic canon, such as Urvaśī, Yamī, Śacī, and others." The phrase 'and the others' refers to the wives of sages as well as women born in human and other families.²⁸

Jayatīrtha glosses the phrase 'and the others' (*tathāparāḥ*) as "the wives of the sages as well as women born in human and other families" (*munistriyaḥ narādikulajās ca*). Since these two words are a direct quotation of Madhva's

26 Sheldon Pollock, "The Theory of Practice and the Practice of Theory in Indian Intellectual History," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105, no. 3 (1985): 506.

27 B N Krishnamurti Sharma, *History of the Dvaita School of Vedānta and Its Literature*, (Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1960), 235.

28 'sapatnīṃ me parādhama' ityātau strīṇāṃ api vedādhikāradarśanāt katham tāsām anadhikāra ityāta uktasyāpavādam āha || āhur iti || tathā parāḥ munistriyo narādikulajās ca | *BSB(a)*, vol. 1, 1.1.1, p. 117. The emphasis on 'as well as' is mine.

words in the *MBTN*, and Madhva has already mentioned goddesses, it appears that Jayatīrtha understands the term ‘and the others’ to refer to the other two categories, i.e., the wives of sages, and women from human and other families. This would mean that Jayatīrtha interprets the particle ‘*api*’ in Madhva’s statement from the *MBTN* as conjunctive rather than concessive, i.e., he takes it to mean, “Goddesses and wives of sages, **as well as those** born in human or other families, are designated as superior”. This might cause the problem of which women remain ineligible at all—given that human women are eligible for Vedic study in this reading. But Jayatīrtha does not expand on this. It would also be possible to understand this in conjunction with Madhva’s statement in the *BSB* about eligibility based on one’s virtues, in which case, women born in human and other families could be considered eligible or ineligible based on their virtues.

This syntactic construction of (a, b, [*api*] c) is a common one in *śāstra* texts. While it most obviously lends itself to the interpretation that c is in coordinate predication with a and b, the structure has been used deliberately to re-interpret the source text in other instances as well. For example, we can turn to a contentious section concerning the status of women in the *Bhagavadgītā* (9.32–33). The most straightforward reading of the verse would be: “Arjuna! Having taken shelter in me, even those who are of sinful birth—women, *vaiśyas*, and *śūdras*—reach the highest state. What [to say] then, of meritorious ones who are devotees—brāhmaṇas, and rājārṣis?²⁹ Rāmānuja’s commentary reads as follows: “Women, *vaiśyas*, and *śūdras*, **although [they are]** of sinful birth, reach the highest state”.³⁰ The same syntactic structure (a, b, c, [*api*] d) clearly identifies women, *vaiśyas*, and *śūdras* as the ones who have a sinful birth, and this is how Veṅkaṭanātha construes the statement in his commentary on Rāmānuja. However, since word-order is interchangeable in Sanskrit, several translators use this to sanitise the passage and present it as if Rāmānuja regards the people of sinful birth as a separate, fourth category.³¹

29 *mām hi pārtha vyapāśritya ye ‘pi syuḥ pāpayonayaḥ | striyo vaiśyās tathā śūdrās te ‘pi yānti parām gatim || kiṃ punar brāhmaṇāḥ puṇyā bhaktā rājārṣayaḥ tathā |...* *Bhagavadgītā* 9.32–33

30 *striyo vaiśvāḥ śūdrās ca pāpayonayo ‘pi mām vyapāśritya parām gatim yānti |* *Gītābhāṣya of Rāmānuja*, Comm. on 9.32–33, p. 320.

31 For instance, see Svāmī Ādidevānanda, *Śrī Rāmānuja Gītā Bhāṣya*, *Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Madras* 600, no. 4 (1991), 321. Some Hindi and Kannada translations carry the same interpretation. For a translation that retains Veṅkaṭanātha’s reading and Rāmānuja’s syntactic structure, see Johannes Adrianus Bernardus Van Buitenen, *Rāmānuja on the Bhagavadgītā: A Condensed Rendering of His Gītābhāṣya with Copious Notes and an Introduction* (Motilal Banarsidass, 1953), 120–21.

Madhva does not explain this verse in his *Gītābhāṣya*, but presents an idiosyncratic reading of the verse in the *Gītātātparyanirṇaya*, where he cites an unattested quote from the *Bhaviṣyatparva* to explain that the qualifier ‘of sinful birth’ (*pāpayonayaḥ*) does not refer simply to all women or *śūdras*, etc., but only to a subset of people who are born as women, etc., due to sin (*pāpa*).³² Madhva tends to present such contentious readings more often in the *Gītātātparyanirṇaya* than the *Gītābhāṣya*. It is also common for Madhva to present different readings of the same verse in the *Gītā* in his two different commentaries,³³ which means that Madhva might be offering this reading as an additional interpretation after accepting the straightforward one, rather than rejecting the straightforward reading. However, Jayatīrtha opts to reject the straightforward reading altogether, and favours a more inclusive reading based on the *Gītātātparyanirṇaya*. Jayatīrtha justifies Madhva’s reading of this particular verse:

Is it not the case that those who have taken shelter under God are all meritorious (*punṇyāḥ*)? This is attested in texts such as: “Even a person of a mixed-caste (*pulkasa*) who has *sattva* qualities and is a devotee ...” Therefore, how can it be that, in the verse beginning with “Having surrendered to me ...”, women, *vaiśyas* and *śūdras* are regarded as sinful, while *brāhmaṇas* and *rājarṣis* are regarded as meritorious?...

In all, this is the purport [of Madhva’s] commentary. Even those who, contrary to their intrinsic nature, are born as women, *vaiśyas*, *śūdras*, *brāhmaṇas*, and *rājarṣis*, reach the highest state. What [to say] then, of those who are born in meritorious [births] in accordance with their intrinsic nature, as women, *vaiśyas*, etc.?³⁴

In this way, Jayatīrtha reads each of the two qualifiers as applying to all the categories of people mentioned in the verse—a rather contrived reading, given

32 *pāpādikāritās caiva puṁsām svābhāvikā api | vipratvādyās tatra punyāḥ svābhāvyā eva muktigāḥ || yānti strīvaṇ puṁsāṃso ‘pi pāpataḥ kāmato ‘pi vā |... tajjanmani varāḥ pāpajātābhyonijasastrīyaḥ ||... itibhaviṣyatparvavacanāt pāpayonayaḥ punyā itiviśeṣaṇam Gītātātparyanirṇaya*, Henceforth GTN 9.32–33, p. 22.

33 For instance, see Madhva’s *Gītābhāṣya* and *Gītātātparyanirṇaya* on 2.46

34 *nanu bhagavadāśrītāḥ sarve ‘pi punyā eva | sattvādhikāḥ pulkaso ‘pi yas tu bhāgavataḥ sadetyādeḥ | ataḥ katham mām hi pārtheti strīvaiśyaśūdrāṇām pāpayonaya iti viśeṣaṇam brāhmaṇarājarṣiṇām punyā iti viśeṣaṇam ucyaṭa ity ata āha |... anenaitad vyākhyātaṁ bhavati | ye pāpādiyonayo ‘svābhāvikāḥ strīyo vaiśyās tathā śūdrāḥ brāhmaṇā rājarṣayaḥ te ‘pi yānti parām gatim | kiṁ punaḥ punyā svābhāvikā ete strīvaiśyādayaḥ |... GTN 9.32–33, p. 23.*

the syntax of the verse. As a justification for this reading, Jayatīrtha argues that anyone who surrenders to God cannot possibly be sinful. Therefore, the straightforward interpretation which regards certain categories of devotees as being of sinful birth must be rejected. Here too, we can see Jayatīrtha opt for a reading more inclusive of (human) women as devotees who surrender to God. While this argument is made in order to justify Madhva's interpretation of the passage, Jayatīrtha dismisses the straightforward reading of the passage in a way that Madhva does not.

Jayatīrtha's sub-commentary on the *Apasūdrādhikaraṇa* is further illuminating on the topic of superior women. The two commentaries that pre-date Jayatīrtha, the *Sattarkadīpāvalī* of Padmanābhatīrtha and the *Tattvapradīpa* of Trivikramapaṇḍita are not helpful on the subject of women. While the former does not offer any comments on women, the *Tattvapradīpa* is very interesting in its refusal to extrapolate on Madhva's statements about superior women. Having quoted the passages from the *R̥gveda* where Urvaśī, Yamī, and Śacī are involved, Trivikramapaṇḍita gives exactly the same three women as instances of superior women, without elaborating any further. Thus, there is a reticence on his part to describe this category or include any other women within it.

Jayatīrtha, on the other hand, explains Madhva's commentary as giving two reasons for the eligibility of some women: a) the rule that there is no eligibility without an initiatory rite is a general rule that can be overruled by more specific rules and b) The wedding rite is an initiatory rite for women that acts as a substitute for the *upanayana* rite.³⁵ Jayatīrtha recognises that b) would be independently sufficient to establish eligibility, but reasons that a) is given for the purpose of application elsewhere in cases where eligibility may be seen without there being an initiatory rite, such as in the case of animals that possess Vedic knowledge.

Without clarifying the limits on the category of superior women, Jayatīrtha chooses to indicate the possible reasoning by which women may have access to the Vedas. Since all married women have presumably undergone the initiatory rite, Jayatīrtha does not provide us with a good reason to refrain from extending the category of superior women to include human women as well. This applies to Madhva's words too, and it is worth noting that one decidedly

35 *saṃskārābhāvena vedādhikārābhāvaḥ sāmānyanyāyenokto na tu niyamena | atas tasya viśeṣa(ṣe)ṇāpavāde na doṣa iti bhāvaḥ |... evaṃ strīṇāṃ upanayanābhāve 'pi pūrvanyāyasya sāmānyatayāpavādasambhavād asti vedādhikāra ity uktam | athopanayanapratinidhisadbhāvē cāsty adhikāra ity āha | asti ceti | yathā puṃsām upanayanādisaṃskāras tathā strīṇāṃ pradānakarmaiva saṃskāra ity arthaḥ | atrāpavādoktiḥ pradānādiśūnyatiryagādīnām api saṅgrahārthā | teṣāṃ api 'ayamagre jaritā' ityādāv adhikāradarśanāt |* BSB(a), vol. 2, Comm. on *Apasūdrādhikaraṇa*, p. 287.

illiberal implication of marriage as initiation is that no unmarried woman is eligible for the study of Vedas. Even this implication, however, can be overruled by using Jayatīrtha's explanation of b), that the necessity of initiation for Vedic study is a general rule that does not apply in every instance of eligibility.

This is an important moment in the development of the *adhikāra* doctrine within Dvaita Vedānta, since Jayatīrtha retains the possibility of the eligibility of human women. Although Jayatīrtha does not openly claim that human women are eligible, or lay down what characteristics may allow them to be superior, the very fact of his ambiguity on the matter is surprising. Jayatīrtha is well known as the systematizer of Dvaita Vedānta, and given the brevity of Madhva's commentary, scholars are forced to consult his commentary to determine Madhva's stance on a variety of issues. As a result of this, Jayatīrtha's stance on doctrinal issues generally remains authoritative and uncontested among later scholars. His commentary poses quite a conundrum for later commentators, who must try to narrow the scope of the eligibility doctrine without disagreeing with him. Just as Jayatīrtha chooses to interpret Madhva in ways that allow him to expand eligibility, later commentators re-interpret the silences or ambiguities retained by Jayatīrtha in ways that limit the category to divine women without explicitly saying so.

Adhikāra in Vyāsātīrtha's Tātparyacandrikā

The most influential commentator in the tradition after Jayatīrtha is Vyāsātīrtha (1460–1539), who is known for his association with the Vijayanagara kingdom. Vyāsātīrtha achieved remarkable acclaim for his influence on the socio-historical trajectory of Dvaita Vedānta. Through his social negotiations with and his philosophical writings targeting his social adversaries, the Smārta brahmins (adherents of Advaita), and Śrīvaiṣṇavas (adherents of Viśiṣṭādvaita), and through the royal patronage of the Vijayanagara polity, Vyāsātīrtha shaped new genres of polemical texts³⁶ and expanded the reach of Dvaita Vedānta in South India.³⁷

In his *Tātparyacandrikā*, a sub-commentary on Jayatīrtha's *Tattvaparakāśikā* on the *BSB*, Vyāsātīrtha does not comment on women at all in the section on eligibility at the beginning of the text. However, he does elaborate on superior

36 See Lawrence McCrea, "Freed by the Weight of History: Polemic and Doxography in Sixteenth Century Vedānta," *South Asian History and Culture* 6, no. 1 (2015): 87–101.

37 See Valerie Stoker, *Polemics and Patronage in the City of Victory* (University of California Press, 2016), esp. 3–7.

women in his explanation of the *Apaśūdrādhikaraṇa*.³⁸ In this passage, he gives a range of quotations from *śruti* texts where women are regarded as eligible. He quotes the passage spoken by Śacī that was previously quoted by Jayatīrtha, and also quotes Madhva's statement from the *BSB*, "They also say that superior women have eligibility for Vedic [knowledge], such as Urvaśī, Yamī, Śacī, etc., and similarly the others".³⁹ Madhva attributes this quote to an untraceable source called the *Vyomasamhitā*, and by quoting it as an authoritative *smṛti* text, Vyāsātīrtha marks his acceptance of Madhva's doctrine.

Vyāsātīrtha goes on to substantiate the position that superior women are eligible by quoting other extant passages from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* involving women. Interestingly, the other passages Vyāsātīrtha quotes here do not reference female deities, but elaborate on Madhva's second category of the wives of sages.⁴⁰ While Śaṅkara references Gārgī in his argument for eligibility, Madhva does not do so. Here, Vyāsātīrtha uses passages spoken to Gārgī and Maitreyī, perhaps because these passages specifically instruct these women in the knowledge of Brahman and also prescribe the performance of actions such as reflecting on Brahman, etc., implying that these women are eligible, not merely as passive recipients of knowledge, but as agents in acquiring and acting on such knowledge that is only obtained through the Vedas.

Vyāsātīrtha makes it clear that it is possible for women and *śūdras* to obtain liberation through the knowledge of the *Mahābhārata*, etc., without ever studying the Vedas. Vyāsātīrtha criticizes the Viśiṣṭādvaitins in this section, to emphasize the point that texts such as the *Mahābhārata* are not merely supplementary texts to enhance the understanding of the Vedas, but can independently give a person ineligible for the Vedas the knowledge required for liberation.⁴¹

The mention of Gārgī and Maitreyī does not tell us their status as human or semi-divine, and as a result, does not tell us which women are superior, but Vyāsātīrtha's conclusion to the passage is interesting – "By this [argument], the interlocutor's doctrine that one is ineligible merely on account of being

38 *BSB* (c), vol. 2, comm. on *Apaśūdrādhikaraṇa*, p. 471.

39 *BSB* (a), vol. 1, 1.1.1, p. 113. See f.n. 14.

40 This could potentially work as evidence that Vyāsātīrtha reads '*munistriyaḥ*' as referring to female sages rather than the wives of sages, if Gārgī is regarded as unmarried. A later commentator, Jagannathatīrtha, however, glosses the term as '*rṣipatnyah*', i.e., 'the wives of sages'. (See f.n. 49)

41 See Ajay Rao and Valerie Stoker, "Polemics and Social Hierarchies: Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita Perspectives on the *Apaśūdrādhikaraṇa*," (Presentation, World Sanskrit Conference, Vancouver, July 12, 2018.)

a woman is disproved”.⁴² Vyāsātīrtha is not concerned about closing off the category of eligible women or commenting on whether human women should study the Vedas. Rather, his concern is polemical—the various reasons provided show conclusively that even his opponents must admit a special category of women who do have such access to the Vedas. As a result, he does not see the need to make explicit which women are superior.

The Shift in the *adhikāra* Doctrine Post-Vyāsātīrtha

After Vyāsātīrtha, we see a shift in these discussions. Later commentators show a greater anxiety about ensuring that human women are exempted from Vedic knowledge by re-interpreting Madhva and Jayatīrtha, and by explaining that the category of eligible women is limited to women of divine or non-human origin.⁴³ They also show a greater concern with clarity and with voicing a single position on doctrinal issues, which is possibly the result of the expanded influence of Dvaita Vedānta within South India and its institutionalization as a school of Vedānta.

Raghūttamatīrtha (1548–96), who was the head of the Uttarādi Maṭha, is best known for his commentarial works, especially on Jayatīrtha. His *Bhāvabodha* is a commentary on Jayatīrtha’s *Tattvaparakāśikā*. Writing not long after Vyāsātīrtha, he quotes a *smṛti* passage to show that women are included among the categories who are not allowed to study the Vedas: “Lord! How should women, *śūdras*, those of the lowest birth (*antyajas*), and others, who are without the study of the Vedas, obtain liberation? How must they enquire into Hari [Viṣṇu]?⁴⁴” This quote clarifies that women are not permitted to study the Vedas.

Raghūttamatīrtha then faces the problem of Jayatīrtha’s seeming inclusion of human women into the category of eligibility. He points out that Jayatīrtha uses the verse from Madhva’s *MBTN* to understand the term ‘superior women’.

42 *etena strīmātrasyānadhikāra iti paramataṃ parāstam* | BSB(c), vol. 2, comm. on *Apaśūdrādhikarana*, p. 471.

43 Another instance of this tendency may be seen in the term *sādhāraṇastrī* used to refer to women who are not superior. This term appears in a seventeenth century comm. on Madhva’s *Aṇubhāṣya* by Chalarī Śeṣācārya. See *Aṇubhāṣya of Madhva*, commentary on 1.3.9, p. 43:

taṣya tātparyam āha jñeyo na vedaiḥ śūdrādyaiḥ iti | ādyaśabdena *sādhāraṇastrīṇāṃ varṇabāhyānāṃ ca grahaṇam* | (emphasis mine)

44 *vedādhyayanahīnā ye strīśūdrāntyajapūrvakāḥ* | *teṣāṃ muktiḥ katham brahmaṇṣ tair jñāṣyō hariḥ katham* || BSB(a), vol. 1, 1.1.1, p. 121.

As we have seen, Madhva's statement is: "It is said that superior women have the eligibility (to study) the Vedic canon, such as Urvaśī, Yamī, Śacī, and the others." Jayatīrtha glosses the phrase 'and the others' (*tathāparāḥ*) as "the wives of the sages as well as women born in human and other families" (*munistriyaḥ narādikulajāś ca*).⁴⁵ Raghūttamatīrtha, in turn, glosses Jayatīrtha's phrase, 'as well as women born in human and other families' (*narādikulajāś ca*), as referring to 'Śacī, etc.'⁴⁶ Presumably, this refers to instances where Śacī and other goddesses incarnate on the earth in human families, such as when Śacī incarnates on the earth in the *Mahābhārata* as Arjuna's wife Citrāṅgadā, according to Madhva's *MBTN*.⁴⁷ The commentator is then arguing that such women are eligible despite their birth in human families. However, this does not fit in either with the *Mahābhārata* narrative, where Citrāṅgadā and other women have no apparent connection to Vedic study, or with Jayatīrtha's own reading, which seems to read the phrase as referring to human women rather than goddesses incarnating on the earth in human families.⁴⁸ This is then Raghūttamatīrtha's attempt to reject the possibility of human women being permitted to access the Veda.

Rāghavendratīrtha (1595–1671), who is widely known as a saint and an important religious figure both within and outside the Dvaita Vedānta tradition, is best appreciated within the tradition for his commentaries on Dvaita texts, particularly on Jayatīrtha's *Nyāyasudhā*. He is faced with a similar conundrum when it comes to women's eligibility. Rāghavendratīrtha, in his *Bhāvadīpa*, is brief on the issue and refrains from offering his comments. He quotes almost verbatim from Vyāsātīrtha's *Tātparyacandrikā* and explains the idea of superior women by glossing the three categories Jayatīrtha gives us from Madhva. Rāghavendratīrtha re-states the category of the wives of sages, which he associates with Gārgī, Maitreyī, and the other women Vyāsātīrtha mentions. But when he is to gloss the category of human and other women, he simply quotes the relevant verse from Madhva's *MBTN* without giving instances or explaining who falls under such a category.⁴⁹

45 *tathāparāḥ munistriyo narādikulajāś ca* | *BSB(a)*, vol. 1, 1.1.1, p. 117.

46 *narādikulajāś ceti / śacyādya ity arthaḥ* || *BSB(a)* 1.1.1, p. 121.

47 *atisnehac cāgrajābhyāṃ tadasya kṣāntaṃ sutā pāṇḍyarājena dattā* | *saṃvatsarānte phalgunasyābhirūpā citrāṅgadā vīrasenena toṣāt* || *sa vīrasenas tvaṣṭur aṃśo yamasyāpy āveśayuk sā ca kanyā śacī hi* | *tārādehe sūryajasyāṅgasaṅgāt svargaṃ nāgād antarikṣād ihāsit* || *MBTN*, vol. 2, 20.160–1, pp. 111–2.

48 Raghūttamatīrtha seems to construe Jayatīrtha's statement: '*tathā parāḥ munistriyo narādikulajāś ca*' as if it were '*tathā parāḥ munistriyo narādikulajā devyaś ca*', taking '*narādikulajāḥ*' as a qualifier of 'goddesses'.

49 *narādikulajāś ceti* | *tad uktaṃ tātparyanirṇaye ekonatrimṣe 'dhyāye* | *BSB*, vol. 1, 1.1.1, p. 125.

However, the clearest revisionist attempt regarding the eligibility doctrine may be seen in Jagannāthātīrtha's (1695–1770)⁵⁰ *Bhāṣyadīpikā*, a commentary on Madhva's *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*. Jagannāthātīrtha was the head of the Vyāsārāja Maṭha, and the *Bhāṣyadīpikā* is regarded as his most important work. Jagannāthātīrtha's text is different from the other texts here since it is a direct commentary on Madhva's text, while the *Tātparyacandrikā*, *Bhāvabodha*, and the *Bhāvadīpa* are sub-commentaries on Jayatīrtha's commentary. Therefore, Jagannāthātīrtha, while drawing from Jayatīrtha, is not forced to conform to his interpretations of every sentence in the text. This allows him the possibility of a more conservative interpretation of the text that clarifies that human women are not permitted to study the Vedas.

Jagannāthātīrtha's commentary on Madhva's passage runs as follows:

The phrase 'superior woman' is a *tatpuruṣa* as well as a *karmadhāraya* compound. Superior women, who are the wives of gods, have the eligibility, not merely for the knowledge of the names of God, but also for the knowledge of Brahman that is produced by the Vedas. The commentator [Madhva] then explains: "Such as Urvaśī, Yamī, and Śacī, etc., and the others". 'Yamī' refers to the wife of the god Yama, who is known as Śyāmalā. The word 'etc.' (*ādyaḥ*) refers to Umā [Pārvatī], Rati [the wife of the god Kāma], etc. The second 'and' refers to the goddesses who are born in human and other families ... The word 'others' refers to the wives of sages, who are not superior but belong to the intermediate category.⁵¹

Jagannāthātīrtha, by regarding the term 'superior woman' (*uttamastrī*) as both a *tatpuruṣa* as well as a *karmadhāraya* compound, claims that the compound can be understood both as 'the wife of a superior man', or as 'a woman who is superior'. These, to him, are overlapping concepts. The wives of superior men are superior women. This category refers primarily to the goddesses. The wives of the sages are ranked below goddesses, and therefore are not strictly 'superior

50 Date as estimated in B N Krishnamurti Sharma, *History of the Dvaita School of Vedānta and Its Literature*, (Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1960), 509.

51 *uttamastrīṇāṃ iti tatpuruṣakarmadhārayau | tathā ca na kevalam uttamānām devānām strīṇām nāmādiññāne 'dhikārah kintu vaidike 'pi jñāne vedotpannabrahmavidyāyām api vaidikāḥ adhikāram āhur iti yojanā | yathorvaśī yamī caiva śacyādyaś ca tathāparāḥ || iti || tāḥ udāharati yathā iti | eva evaṃ yamī yamasya bhāryā śyāmalā | caśabda uktasamuccaye | ādyaśabdena umāratyādi grhyate | anuktasamuccaye dvitīyaś caḥ, tena manuṣyādikulotpannadevastrīyo grhyante | tathāśabdaḥ upamāyām uktasamuccaye vā | aparāḥ uttamastribhyo anyāḥ ṛṣipatnyāḥ | avarā iti vā uttamadevastryapekṣayā madhyamaṛṣipatnīnām avaratvād iti | BSB(b), comm. on 1.1.1.65, p. 31.*

women', but they are eligible for the study of the Vedas nevertheless. This sits uneasily with Madhva's own classification in the *MBTN* where the wives of sages are also treated as superior, but aligns more closely with Madhva's classification in the *BSB*, where the gods are superior and sages are intermediate. Jagannāthatīrtha carefully glosses every particle in Madhva's *BSB*, including the two repetitions of 'and', and the phrase 'and similarly the others' to include only divine women as eligible, and to exclude human women.

Jagannāthatīrtha makes his point even clearer in his commentary on the *Apaśūdrādhikaraṇa*. Commenting on Madhva's statement that the wedding ritual acts as an initiatory rite in the case of women, he writes: "If the initiatory rite alone were to be sufficient to promote eligibility, then there would be the undesirable consequence that even inferior women (*adhamastriyaḥ*) would have it [eligibility]. But this is not the case, because the initiatory rite only establishes eligibility in cases where there is no other prohibition on eligibility".⁵² While other commentators express the idea that eligibility has as one of its prerequisites the lack of prohibition in the case of the *śūdra*'s eligibility, Jagannāthatīrtha applies the rule to women.

Here, Jagannāthatīrtha expresses an idea that has not been made explicit by any of the previous commentators. Firstly, he introduces the category antithetical to the 'superior woman', i.e., the 'inferior woman' (*adhamastrī*). While this category is implied by the very notion of 'superior' (as opposed to 'intermediate' and 'inferior'), the previous commentators on the *BSB* have not mentioned any such category, or analysed which groups belong to them. Since Jagannāthatīrtha takes us back to the tripartite classification (introduced by Madhva, but with reference to men), where the superior women are goddesses, and the intermediate women are the wives of the sages, it is clear that human women are inferior, and are thus barred from Vedic study.

Conclusion

Jagannāthatīrtha's position is widely accepted, but not unanimously, within the contemporary Mādhva community. BNK Sharma (1909–2005), a scholar and exponent of Madhva's philosophy, even while arguing that Madhva was the only commentator "who has recognized the existence of women of the highest spiritual attainments, eligible for Brahmavīcāra [reflection on Brahman]

52 *na ca saṃskāramātrasya vedādhikāraprayojakatve adhamastrīṇām api tadāpattir iti vācyam* | *niṣedhābhāvasahitasyaiva tasya prayojakatvābhyupagamāt* | *BSB(b)*, comm. on 1.3.36.12, p. 323.

through the Vedānta”,⁵³ does not elaborate on who these ‘women of the highest spiritual attainments’ are.

At the start of this paper, we briefly saw a new strand of thought regarding eligibility in the writings of Bannañje Govindācārya (1936–2020), a Mādhva scholar and commentator from twenty-first century coastal Karnataka, whose views on the subject generated controversy among orthodox members of the community for being accepting of women’s Vedic study. He discusses the eligibility of women to study the Vedas in his Sanskrit commentary on Madhva’s *MBTN*:

The primary and unique duty of women is to give birth ... Experts in the science of medicine opine: “Women have something that men do not—a womb. Protecting the womb is [their] foremost duty in order to ensure strong progeny. The womb is weakened if excessive importance is given to the intellect. This results in weak progeny. Therefore, it is not right for women to make too much effort in the study of the Vedas or higher education for women. Hence, knowers of scripture opine that the knowledge of the Vedas must not be forced upon women. Those who are highly intelligent, superior women, will, in accordance with their intrinsic nature, desire to study [the Vedas]. They will proceed to study it and teach it. Their nature will impel them [Reference to the *Bhagavadgītā* 18.59]. Therefore, Madhva says: “Superior women too, ought to know the Vedas”. Such as? Such as Draupadī, etc. Who are these superior women? Madhva says: “Goddesses and the wives of sages, are, by their nature, superior. Therefore, even when they are born in the families of humans, animals, or birds, they are understood to remain superior.” But [the category of superior women] is not limited to them. Even those mortal women who have a special presence of goddesses, etc. [are superior].⁵⁴

53 B N Krishnamurti Sharma, *Philosophy of Śrī Madhvācārya* (Motilal Banarsidass Publ., 1986), 375.

54 *prajananaṃ hi tāsāṃ mukhyadharmah | asādhāraṇaś ca |... vadanti vaidyāśāstrapravīṇāḥ—asti strīṇāṃ puruṣeṣv avidyamānaḥ pratiko garbhakośo nāma | tasya rakṣaṇaṃ prathamakartavyaṃ vīryavatsantānāya | durvalo bhavati garbhakośo yadi buddhāv adhiabhāro nidhīyate | tena ca durbalā santatir bhavati | tena vedādyuccaśikṣaṇe na nirbandhaḥ strīṇāṃ samucita iti | ataḥ śāstravido ‘bhīp-
rayanti na deyaṃ balād vedādisikṣaṇaṃ strīṇāṃ | yāstv adhiakaprajñā uttamastri-
yas tāḥ svabhāvasahajatayādhijigāṃsante | adhiyate cādhyāpayanti ca | prakṛtis tu sarvaṃ niyoṣyatīti | tad idam āha—vedā apy uttamastribhir jñeyā iti | uttamābhiḥ
stribhir api vedā jñeyā iti | tad yatha—kṛṣṇādyāḥ | kṛṣṇā draupadī || kāmāḥ? āha—
devastriyo munistriyaś ca svarūpata uttamāḥ | atas tā narapaśupakṣyādikulajāḥ api*

The idea that the primary religious duty of women is in their role as mothers is a common trope in Sanskrit scriptural texts. This new, creative argument for ambiguity rests on the gerundive form used by Madhva. Madhva uses the *tavyat* grammatical suffix, indicating that the action of Vedic study “ought to” be done. In other words, Madhva makes Vedic study compulsory on the part of men of the first three *varṇas*. Women, on the other hand, according to Govindācārya, are not mentioned because Vedic study is not an obligation as far as they are concerned, since it is optional for them.

In fact, Govindācārya maintains that when women are truly superior in intellect, their own desire for knowledge will impel them to study the Vedas, and they will not need an external injunction to make it compulsory for them to do so. This is coupled with the appeal to modern medicine to argue that higher levels of education have a detrimental impact on women’s primary duties by affecting their reproductive capacities. To my knowledge, this interpretation has not been advanced by any traditional commentaries.

Madhva’s *MBTN* mentions several epic characters who have a special presence of goddesses. Govindācārya does not specify who such women might be, or how they can be identified. But I believe that this is his point—to advance a reading that chooses to leave the category open-ended and permit any women who desire to study the Vedas the scriptural sanction to do so. This passage is illustrative of a revisionist attempt within certain sections of the Mādhva community to reject the interpretations of the text received through the commentarial tradition and revert to Madhva’s source text to recover Madhva’s doctrines in their most authentic form.

In this way, the doctrine of women’s eligibility has a nuanced history in Dvaita Vedānta. It begins with ambiguity in Madhva’s own writings, through some inconsistent taxonomies and ambiguous syntactic structure, followed by Jayatīrtha’s tacit acceptance of the eligibility of some unspecified human women for Vedic study. Following Vyāsātīrtha in the sixteenth century, and coinciding with the expansion of the influence of Dvaita Vedānta in southern India, we see concerted efforts to limit the ambiguity in earlier statements on eligibility. This could be an effort to discard ambiguity in older doctrines as Mādhva Vedānta gained greater influence and wider acceptance. The institutionalization of Mādhva Vedānta as a legitimate school of Vedānta by this point could have created the necessity for a unified doctrinal position on all important matters.

uttamā eveti vijñeyāḥ | *na kevalam* | *devyādibhir viśeṣataḥ sannihitā martyastriyo* ‘pi |
MBTN, vol. 2, commentary on 29.38, p. 560.

Today, however, among a small section of contemporary Mādhva scholars, many of whom are disciples of Govindācārya, there is an attempt to reject the concerted efforts made between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries by commentarial tradition following Madhva. While those premodern commentators foreclose the possibility of human women being allowed to study Vedic texts, some now argue that Madhva's statements on the issue must be considered independently of their reception history. In doing so, they promote Mādhva Vedānta as a liberal system of thought that allows women eligibility for Vedic study and, in turn, sanction the practice of such study by women in present times.

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